



MOVING BACK: The disputed site at Little Waltham, protected by concrete pillars. Above, a scene when travellers were evicted in January

Photographs:
JAMES
FLETCHER



Fresh claims on 'home land'

A GROUP of travellers evicted from farmland amid violent scenes is planning to return.

About 50 bailiffs removed 15 travellers' families from farmland in Little Waltham in January because they did not have planning permission to stay there. There were angry

confrontations at the site as the bailiffs moved in, backed up by police officers in riot gear, with some alleged assaults.

The site in Cranham Road is now derelict and surrounded by a 5ft high wall of earth.

But after almost three months on the road, the

travellers are planning to go back.

A traveller named Peter said he was in touch with his former neighbours, now spread across East Anglia, and they planned to hire a digger to remove the barrier of earth and get back onto the land within two weeks.

The father-of-four, who was on the move yesterday from his pitch in Great Dunmow, added: "A lot of us are going back there.

"I was there for nearly two years. It is my home, it is where my children were growing up.

"My kids were happy at the local school. Their

education is being ruined, so we're going back.

"I do not understand why we are treated with disdain. We get this image because we're different - we choose not to live in houses. We spent a lot of money buying land there - it's ours."

It cost Chelmsford

Borough Council more than £100,000 to remove the travellers. It said it was unlawful to put caravans on the field.

A spokeswoman said last night: "We're monitoring the Cranham Road site closely and will take any precautions necessary to prevent new entry."

PHOTOS BY MARTIN DALTON



BATTLE OF CRANHAM ROAD: Traveller families feel the strong arm of the law

Eviction misery

CAMPAIGNERS for travellers' rights have condemned action taken by Chelmsford Council to evict a group from Little Waltham.

Emma Nuttall, unit manager of the Friends, Families and Travellers group, described the action as highly inappropriate.

She said: "This local authority has not given these travellers adequate opportunity to obtain planning permission to develop the land they own."

"It is very confusing for travellers. They do what they think is right and buy land, then they cannot understand why they are not given planning permission to live on it."

"These families are now homeless, on the roadside."

One traveller, Rosanne Purcell, 25, said she was devastated that she had been evicted after spending her life savings on buying a plot.

She is worried about the impact being forced to move will have on her children's education.

She said: "My six-year-old boy has settled in at school and he will come back tonight and have no home. They have taken my kids' future away from them."

"I am sick with frustration and could cry all day."

Miss Nuttall also criticised Essex County Council for its inadequate provision for travellers.

There are 11 official traveller sites in the county, which are owned and managed by the county council, but there are no vacancies on any of them.

Nationally, while 80 per cent of planning applications from settled people are granted consent, more than 90 per cent of applications from travellers are refused.

Miss Nuttall said: "The discrimination within planning decisions and the lack of sites for travellers effectively forces them to set up on unauthorised sites."

Nearby Cranham Road residents, however, who say they have endured years of noise, litter and verbal abuse from the travellers, are glad to see the

back of their unwanted neighbours.

One man said: "I am looking forward to life getting back to normal now."



NO ENTRY: Protesters are watched by security guards and police at the site in Cranham Road on Saturday which has been made a no-go zone

Kathy come home – I'll fight for my land



LET'S TALK ABOUT IT: Kathy Buckland with mediator Steve Lemay on Tuesday.

Men in black guard closed lane

MOTORISTS prevented from using Cranham Road, Little Waltham, are furious over its closure on Saturday by the council.

Concrete pipe sections were placed in the lane to prevent travellers from returning to the unauthorised site and are guarded by private security staff.

Alan Jones, of Maldon, said: "It was a sledgehammer to crack a nut. The sight of men in black with a

Rottweiler stopping drivers and telling them to turn around could be intimidating."

David Green, head of town planning services said: "Bailiffs now wear high-visibility vests, marked Security, carry borough council ID cards and the Rottweiler is banned."

The security staff are manning check points at the site after Saturday's symbolic attempt by gipsies and New Age travellers to reclaim the land.

A small number of travellers planted flags and dug away at the earth ramparts surrounding the site.

There had been concerns that travellers would attempt to use a digger but, in the end, a handful of protesters arrived with a few spades. The council says that the blocked section of the lane is no-go zone and will remain closed until further notice.

TRAVELLER Kathy Buckland has vowed to continue her bid to live on the authorised caravan site at Little Waltham.

The pregnant mother of three holds title deeds to a plot on the one hectare site off Cranham Road which was blocked by Chelmsford Borough Council at the weekend over fears that evicted travellers planned to return.

The other travellers have no right of access to the site which is now surrounded by a 12ft high earth bund, but Ms Buckland's ownership enables her to demand that a path be cut into the mound to her plot.

Kathy, 28, whose mother is a Romany, said: "I paid good money for the plot. It wasn't cheap and I am not selling. I may be uneducated and a gipsy but I am not stupid and know my rights. I am going to fight until the last breath in my body."

She is the only traveller known to own a plot at the site which was declared off limits to 'human habitation' by a High Court Judge on Friday.

Mr Justice David Clarke backed an injunction taken out by the council preventing the site from being used for stationing caravans, mobile homes, portable structures such as toilets, for the purposes of human habitation or any other purpose that breaches planning control.

Also banned are any waste materials or hardcore for any purpose including the creation of hardstandings or hard surfaces.

Ms Buckland went to the site on

By Steve Clow

Tuesday and was met by Steve Lemay, appointed by the council to act as mediator.

"He was very fair and listened to what I had to say and said he would tell the council how I felt," she said.

Ms Buckland, whose fourth child is due in September, described how her children, Loreal, five, Johnny, four, and two-year-old Jerry had suffered stress after their eviction from the site in January.

"We were shoved into a terrible halfway home that I wouldn't keep a rabbit in but, on Monday, the council gave me the keys to a house in Great Baddow and things are getting better for us. We can now claim benefits.

School

"The two eldest were getting on so well at Great Waltham School and Loreal was starting to read and write. They were confused and cried at being uprooted and could not go back to school with their friends."

David Green, head of the borough council's town planning services, said: "We have tried to be sensitive to Kathy Buckland's needs and have been to quite a lot of effort, including processing the claim that she was made homeless so that she and her children were able to take up the tenancy of a three-bedroomed home earlier this week.

"We hope shortly to enter into direct discussions with her to come to a binding legal agreement over the land and settle the issue amicably."

Assembly elections

YOUNG people from Essex are making their voices heard in the elections for the new Young Essex Assembly this month.

The assembly is intended to mirror the county council, with members taking responsibility for specific areas, such as education, transport, or social services.

Its aim is to give young people a voice and a chance to become actively involved in developing the services.

The idea is that it should meet three times a year at County Hall in Chelmsford, with sub-groups meeting locally, and liaising with local youth councils.

Stu Meese, of Essex Youth Service, said: "The first and most important thing for young people is to be heard. The Young Essex

Travellers seek council homes

SIX traveller families from an unauthorised site in Little Waltham are to meet housing officers tomorrow (Friday) to seek council homes.

But Chelmsford Borough Council will also tell them that it has found some vacant pitches on sites near the M25, should they wish to move on.

The travellers are among a group of around 20 to 30 currently living in caravans on the unauthorised site, in Cranham Road. They've been given a deadline of 8am Monday to move before council-appointed contractors clear the site.

Approximately 15-20 travellers visited the council's offices on Monday.

By Joy Baker

A council spokesperson confirmed that housing officers would meet six families to deal with their homelessness applications later this week.

She said: "Temporary accommodation may be provided whilst any applications for re-housing are assessed.

"We have a statutory duty to re-house those who are unintentionally homeless, in priority need and connected to the borough in some way. Advice and assistance can be given to those on site if they become homeless."

Paul Stevens, one of the travellers, said they were following their solicitor's advice in going to the housing offices.

"We're an ethnic minority and we are

asking them to find us some land so we can live our lives," he said.

Chelmsford Borough Council says it is under no obligation to find them alternative sites, but officers did contact local authorities "with close proximity" to the M25.

"Officers have located some authorised sites that have vacancies currently and we will be passing on this information to the travellers on Friday," said the spokesperson.

The site in Little Waltham has attracted complaints from local residents since 2001. Because the travellers own the land, attempts to restore it to agricultural use have had to be dealt with under planning law and new police powers to move on travellers do not apply.

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£150,000 bill for eviction

"11See you"

EXCLUSIVE by Steve Clow

CHELMSFORD Borough Council is poised to send 12 owners of the unauthorised travellers' site at Little Waltham a bill to help pay for January's £150,000 eviction.

Council officers have obtained names and addresses from the Land Registry and say that if the owners do not contribute a court order will be sought to sell the land to pay for the cost of hiring bailiffs.

David Green, head of the council's town planning services said: "The full cost of having to take direct action, around £150,000, will have to be met by the 12 plot holders."

"We know who they are. Some may be travellers, but all will shortly get a bill which could amount to around £15,000 each. They will have three months to settle or we will sell the land."

Road blocked

Newly appointed bailiffs are manning two concrete blockades closing a short section of Cranham Road next to the site.

Mr Green said that the closure prevented the site being reclaimed and helped maintain public safety. The no-go zone will remain until further notice.

But motorists, such as Alan Jones from Maldon who regularly used the lane, claim the council had no right to close it to traffic.

He said: "How can the council justify closing the highway indefinitely on the off-chance the travellers could return? The cost of security must be huge."

Bailiffs, backed by more than 50 police, moved in on January 26 to evict 15 caravan families who had occupied the site since November 2001.

Meanwhile traveller Kathy Buckland re-